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Tropic Temper

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A MEMOIR OF MALAYA

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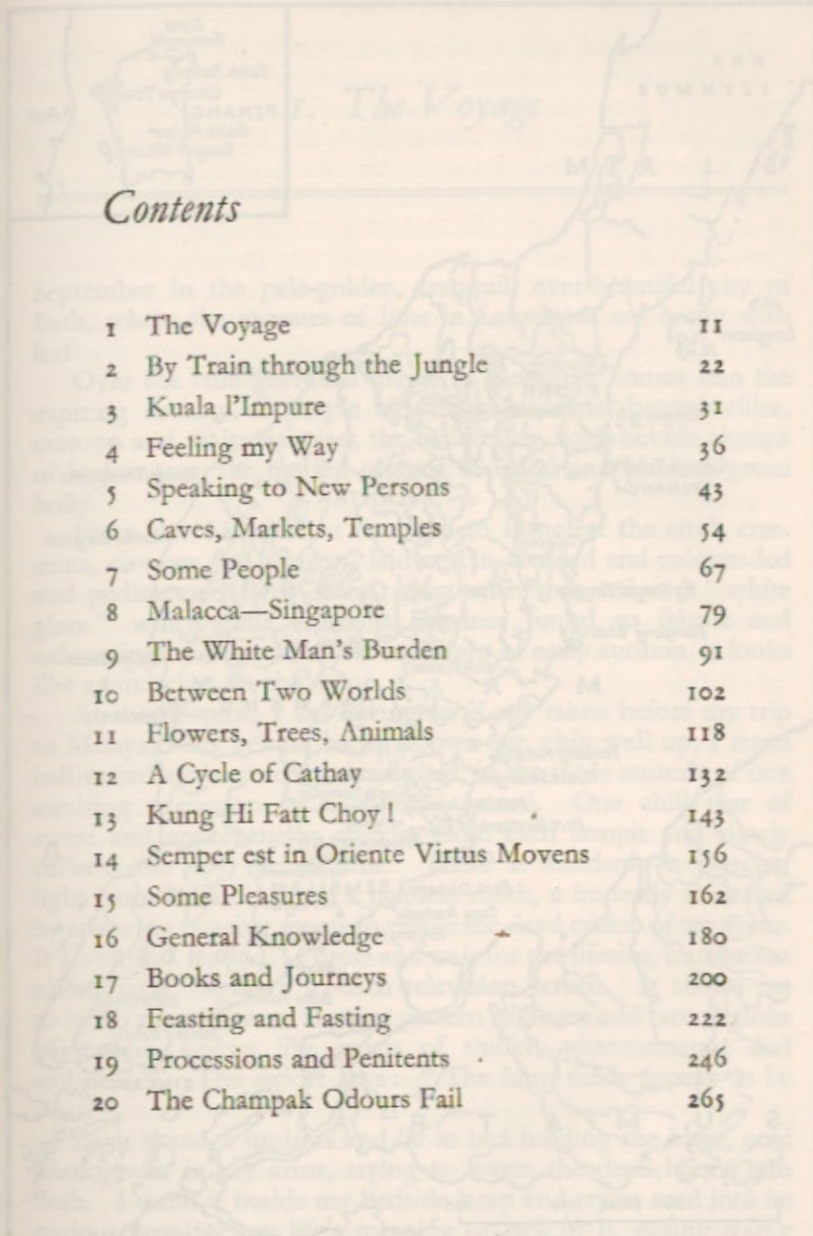


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I. *The Voyage*

September in the pale-golden, tranquil, ever-beautiful city of Bath, where the avenues of lime in Lansdown are heavy with leaf.

Over the trim-gravelled drives of Georgian houses lean the expiring rockets of purple or yellow buddleia, bougainvillea, maroon and white valerian, the ballooning, soap-bubble clumps of hydrangeas, the massed glooms of laurel and blackish-green holly.

From Beechen Cliff or the road to Longleat the city's crescents, circuses and squares, laid out in arcaded and colonnaded and pedimented Bath stone, glow with that reduced "white glare" which Jane Austen's heroines found so febrile and exhausting: but now, in the cool light of early autumn, it looks like a landscape on the moon.

At the hospital, I am having an X-ray taken before my trip to Malaya. Fists behind back, elbows out, chin well up, I stand half-naked at the cold block of glass, in the tense attitude of one awaiting execution by a samurai sword. One' chill tear of sweat and apprehension trickles from each armpit and slowly roller-coasts my racked ribs. There is suddenly a piercing light from behind: I am a helpless moth, a butterfly skewered by a blazing pin that seems to pierce the dead centre of my spine. It's over in a second. I dress and wait for the lifesize, translucent photograph, big as a 21-inch television screen. It shows me to be no more than an abstract pattern of bones and tartan hanks of muscle, sinews like twists of smoke, phantomesque and ambisexual. The report says: "The lung fields appear to be clear."

Back home, I undress and lie in bed holding the huge, cold photograph in my arms, trying to warm the dead bones into flesh. I stand it beside my bedside lamp and try to read into its curious negative my life's meaning or lack of it, gazing warily

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at the impersonal, elemental system that is myself, that screen through which experience flows, sometimes leaving marks and stains as if from illnesses, fractures, deformities, wounds. And there, between one beat and another, the heart in its grate of ribs burns like a lump of coal under the smouldering lung.

A fortnight later and I am aboard a middle-class, middle-aged liner that is to leave Southampton for Penang by way of Gibraltar, Port Said, Suez, Aden, Bombay.

With the utmost reluctance I have bought my first dinner-suit: in the first-class dining-room, the glittering brochures inform me, one is expected to dress for dinner. What would happen if I went in wearing my nice dark lounge-suit instead? Would they refuse to serve me? I must try it on.

A gale has been blowing all day and night in the Channel. It is cold in Southampton, whose modern centre is mercifully lit and blessed by swooping gulls.

The captain is ill, though apparently the passengers are not supposed to know this. A friendly bar steward gave me the information as, feeling already semi-colonial, I sipped a well-chilled lager and lime. Our sailing is delayed until the arrival of another captain.

After lunch, the passengers are treated to a free coach-tour to view the vintage cars at Beaulieu Abbey, a delightful jaunt. In Southampton Roads, as we bowl along in our hired coaches, we can see the great ocean liners lying high up in the water, like anchored clouds.

Already on the coaches the usual shipboard friendships and flirtations are beginning, peculiarly shallow, too shallow to be heartless. Behind my smoked glasses tinged with pink, I remain happily unmolested and anonymous. Is this a good thing? I had determined that this time I would collect people as well as objects and places. I must try a little harder, but not just yet.

There are some bands of Chinese, vast families of them going to Singapore or Hong Kong: they too keep to themselves, steering away from the British. At tea-time in the Abbey Cafeteria the Chinese all sit at the same long table, chattering away animatedly in Cantonese with its complaining intonations that sometimes sound like cross, extra-rapid French.